

The Trey O' Hearts

(Continued from Page Three)

fore they could gain the desert on the far side of the hills.

Only at long intervals did they draw rein to permit Hopi Jim to make reconnaissance of the lower trail that threaded the valley on the far side of the ridge.

Toward noon he returned in haste from the last of these surveys—scrambling recklessly down the mountain-side and throwing himself upon his horse with the advice:

"We've headed 'em—can make it now if we ride like all get-out!"

For half an hour more they pushed on at the best speed to be obtained from their weary animals, at length drawing rein at a point where the trail crossed the ridge and widened out upon a long, broad ledge that overhung the valley of the lower trail, with a clear drop to the latter from the brink of a good two hundred feet.

One hasty look back and down into the valley evoked a grant of satisfaction from Hopi Jim.

"Just in time," he asseverated. "Here they come! Ten minutes more . . ."

His smile answered Marrophat's with unspeakable cruel significance.

"Texas will sleep better tonight when he knows how I've squared the deal for him!" the bandit declared.

"What are you going to do?" Judith demanded, reining her horse in beside Marrophat as the latter dismounted.

A gesture drew her attention to a huge boulder poised insecurely on the very lip of the chasm.

"We're going to tip that over on your friends, Miss Judith?" Marrophat replied, with a smack of relish in his voice. "Simple—neat—efficient—eh? What more can you ask?"

She answered only with an irrefragable gesture of horror. Marrophat's laugh followed her as she turned away.

For some moments she strained her vision vainly, endeavoring to penetrate the turbulent currents of super-heated air that filled the valley. Then she made out indistinctly the faint, marked line of the lower trail, and immediately she caught a glimpse of three small figures, mounted, toiling painfully toward the point where death awaited them like a bolt from the blue.

Hastily she glanced over-shoulder. Hopi Jim and Marrophat, knowing her were straining themselves against the boulder without budging it an inch, for all its apparent nicety of poise. For an instant a wild hope flashed through her mind, but it was immediately extinguished when Hopi Jim stopped back and uttered a few words of which only two—"dynamite" and "fuse"—reached her ears.

Kneeling beside the boulder he dug busily for an instant, then forced the stick to his satisfaction, attached the fuse, and breaking off, edged on his belly to the edge of the cliff and looked down, carefully calculating the length of the fuse by the distance of the party down below from the spot where the rock must fall.

But while he was so engaged and Marrophat aided him, all easier interest, Judith was taking advantage of their disregard of her.

Hurriedly unbuttoning her jacket, she whipped a playing card from her pocket, a trey o' hearts, and with the stub of a pencil scribbled three words on its face—"Danger! Go back!"

Then finding a small, flatish bit of rock, she bound the card to it with a bit of string, and with one more backward glance to make sure she was not watched, approached the brink.

Hopi Jim was meticulously shortening the fuse, Marrophat kneeling by his side.

In the canyon below the three were within two minutes of the danger point.

It was no trick at all to drop the stone so that it fell within a dozen feet of the leading horseman.

She saw him rein in suddenly, dismount, cast a look aloft, then dismount and pick up the warning.

As the others joined him, he detached the card and showed it to them.

At the same time Hopi Jim and Marrophat jumped up and ran back, each seizing and holding his horse by nose and bridle.

Constrained to do likewise lest she lose her mount, Judith waited with a lightened heart.

The explosion smote dull echoes from the flanks of the Painted hills, all drowsing in the noon-day hush; the boulder teetered reluctantly on the brink, then disappeared with a tearing sound followed by a rush of earth and gravel; a wide gap appeared in the brink of the trail.

Leaving Marrophat to hold the two frightened horses while the girl soothed her own, the bandit rushed to the edge, threw himself flat and swore bitterly, with an accent of grievance, as he rose.

From the canyon below a dull noise of galloping hoofs advertised too plainly the failure of their attempt.

And Hopi Jim turned back only to find Judith mounted, reining her horse in between him and Marrophat, and prepared to give emphasis to what she had to say with an automatic pistol that nestled snugly in her palm.

"One moment, Mr. Slade," she suggested evenly. "Just a moment before you break the sad news to Mr. Marrophat, I've something to say that needs your attention—likewise, your respect. It is this: I am parting company with you and Mr. Marrophat. I am riding on toward the west, by this trail. If either of you care to follow me—the automatic flashed ominously in the sun glare—"it will be with full knowledge of the consequences. Mr. Marrophat will enlighten you if you have any doubt of my ability to take care of myself in such affairs as this. If you are well advised, you will turn back and report failure to my father."

She nodded curtly and swung her horse round.

"And what shall I tell your father from you?" Marrophat demanded sharply.

"What you please," the girl replied, flashing an implish smile over-shoulder. "But, since when I part company with you, I part with him as well—for all of me, you may tell him to go to the devil!"

"Well," Mr. Marrophat admitted contentedly to Mr. Slade, "I'm damned!"

"And that ain't all," Mr. Slade continued in Mr. Marrophat, whipping out his own revolver. "You're being held up, too. I'll take those guns of yours, friend, and what else you've got about you that's of value, including your boss—when you get back to old man Trine you can just tell him, with my best compliments, that I've quit the job and lit out after that daughter of his. She's a heap sight more attractive than nineteen thousand dollars, and not half so hard to earn!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.
Burnt Fingers.
Once she had lost touch with her father's creatures, the girl drew rein and went on more slowly and cautiously.

Below her, in the valley, the lower trail wound its facile way. From time to time she could discern upon some naked stretch of its length a cloud of dust, or perhaps three mounted figures, scurrying madly on with fear of death snapping at their heels.

It was within an hour of midnight, a night bell-clear and bitter cold on the heights, and bright with moonlight, when Alan's party made its last pause and camped to rest against the dawn, unconscious of the fact that, a quarter of a mile above them, on the upper trail, a lonely woman paused when they paused and made her own camp on the edge of a sharp declivity.

The level shafts of the rising sun awakened her. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, yawned, stretched limbs stiff with the hardship of sleeping on unyielding, sun-baked earth—and of a sudden started up, surprised by the grating of footsteps on the earth behind her.

Before she could turn, however, she was caught and wrapped in the arms of Hopi Jim.

She mustered all her strength and wits and will for one last struggle—and in a frenzied moment managed to break his hold a trifle, enough to enable her to snatch at the pistol hanging from her belt and present it at his head.

But it exploded harmlessly, spending its bullet on the blue of the morning sky. The bandit caught her wrist in time, thrust it aside and subjected it to such cruel pressure and such savage wrenchings that the pistol dropped from his fingers banded with pain.

And now all hint of mercy left his eyes, remained only the glare of rage. He put forth all his strength in turn, and Judith was as a child in his hands. In half a minute he had her helpless, in as much time more her back was breaking across his knee, while he bound her with loop after loop of his rawhide lariat.

Then, leaving her momentarily supine on the ground, Hopi Jim caught and unhobbled her horse, and without troubling to saddle it, lifted the girl to its back, and placed her there, face upward, catching her hands and feet, as they fell on either flank of the animal, with more loops of that unbreakable rawhide, and dextrously placing the master knot of the hitch that bound this human pack well beyond possibility of her reach.

She panted a prayer for mercy. He laughed in her face, bent and kissed her brutally, and stepped back laughing to admire his handiwork.

Thus he stood for an instant between the horse and the edge of the declivity, a fair mark, stark against the sky, for one who stood in the valley below, holding his rifle with eager fingers, waiting for just such opportunity with the same impatience with which he had waited for it ever since the noise of debris kicked over the edge by the struggling man and woman had drawn his attention to what was going on above.

Alan pressed the trigger and the shot sounded clear in the morning stillness. Judith saw a look of aggrieved amazement cross the face of Hopi Jim Slade.

Then he threw his hands out, clawed blindly at the air, staggered, reeled against the horse's flank so heavily that it shied in fright, and abruptly shot from sight over the edge of the bluff.

Continued Next Week

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